Tape: 005

Transcript of Interview with John Baker

Conducted by Jim Muhn

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INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BAKER

This is an interview with John Baker presently Chief of the Branch of or the Division of Resource Services at the Service Center in Denver, Colorado, on September 27, 1991. Jim Muhn, Historian at the Service Center, conducting the interview.

JIM: Okay, Mr. Baker. The first thing, I guess, we'll have you do is give us a brief biographical sketch on both your, basically your education and then your work experience, both professionally and with the Bureau of Land Management.

JOHN: Okay. I was born in the state of Colorado, and I graduated from high school in the state of Kansas, and I attended the University of Wyoming and graduated and got married in the state of Wyoming. And I've been in a state of confusion ever since.

JIM: Your degree was in at the University of Wyoming?

JOHN: I got a Bachelor's, a science degree in Range Management from the University of Wyoming and then a Master’s science in Range Management from the University of Wyoming. The last two years while attending school, I worked half-time for the Agriculture Research Service doing range land graphs research. Actually, when I graduated with my bachelor's, I was ready to go to work and the only job offer I had was with the Missouri River Basin Studies at a GS-4 with the Bureau of Land Management. And I wasn't pleased with that, so I went on and got my masters. And then I got a permanent job offer from the Bureau of Land Management in the Casper District in Wyoming. I started there in June of 1959. My first job they gave me a Dodge Carryall and a couple paste board boxes full of files and maps and inspection reports and a handful of credit cards. At that time, we didn't have a universal GSA credit card. We had credit cards for all the various stations like Texaco and Conoco and so forth. So, they gave me all of this and said, now you're to go out and inspect all these projects and put project markers on them and make a writeup on the condition of the projects. So, I took off, never been in the country before. And with maps

and consulting with ranchers, I found all the projects and got them duly marked with a project marker and inspection report made out. I ran my first range survey that first summer on some Section 15 lands over around Wheatman. And, someone must have been pleased with that because the next summer I was assigned to a statewide range survey crew. They call that range inventory today. And, I worked on this statewide crew for 2 years over in the Cumberland Unit and the Rock Springs District and the Colorado Desert Unit in what was then the Pinedale District. In 1960, the State Director, Ed {**Pierson**}, at that time, came to me and said, we got a couple of openings. One in Lander and one in Rock Springs. And I said, well, I think I'd prefer to go to Lander. So, they transferred me to Rock Springs. And, I spent 4, almost 4-1/2 years in Rock Springs primarily running range survey in the summer time and counting sheep in the winter time. We used to count the sheep coming off of the summer range onto the fall range. There was about 300,000 sheep came across the CCC bridge across the Green River. And we counted onto the fall range and then also the Granger Unit and the Carter Lease in the District, we counted another 150,000 sheep. And my partner and I got to be pretty good sheep counters even though we had never done it before. In 1964, around Thanksgiving time, I got a call from Don {**Gythe**} who was the District Manager at Kanab, Utah, and asked if I'd be interested in Assistant District Manager's job in Kanab. And I immediately shuffled through my drawer to find a map cause I'd never heard of Kanab, Utah. I didn't know where it was. And I told him, well, I'll have to talk to my wife. So, I talked to her, and she was ready cause neither one of us enjoyed living in Rock Springs. I enjoyed the work, but the town was the pits. So, I called him back and said, yeah, I'd be interested. And I didn't hear and I didn't hear and so, about a week before Christmas, I called the office down there to see what was going on. And they said, oh Mr. **Gythe**'s on 2 weeks annual leave. So, I didn't hear anything until about the first week of January. I got a travel authorization to move my household goods and that was the first I heard that I got the job. We spent about 3 years in Kanab and really enjoyed it there. I started out as Assistant District Manager and in 64 is when the organized into Resource Areas and appointed Resource Area Managers and so my job title was changed to Chief, Division of Resource Management, in the District. In 1966, late in the year, I was transferred to Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Same job, same grade as Chief, Division of Resource Management. And I enjoyed my tenure there in Glenwood so much, so we lived there 7-1/2 years. And I'd probably still be there

but they closed the District Office, and it became an Area Office and the rest of the District went to either Craig or Grand Junction or Canon City. I was given a directed reassignment to Las Cruces, New Mexico, as Chief, Division of Resource Management. Las Cruces was a nice town, but we really never enjoyed it there. The range was frustrating. About all you can do is look at that desert. There's not much you can do for it. And so I applied and got a job here at the Denver Service Center as a Planning Environmental Coordination staff. And, I got to, came to Denver on Christmas Day and the second of January, right after New Year's, I was detailed to Portland, Oregon, for a month to work on the Artic Gas Pipeline EIS and after I finished that, then I was detailed for another 30 days to Washington, DC, to finish that EIS. When I got back, then the new planning manuals were just hot off the press. That was the planning manuals that used the unit resource analysis and the management framework plan concept. And, so I spent 16 weeks straight of traveling to various State and District Offices putting on training on use of these new manuals and procedures. I stayed on the planning and environmental coordination staff for 2 years. Toward the end, I was the primary reviewer on many of the grazing environmental impact statements that were being started at that time. And then in 1976, I moved over to the range staff here in the Service Center. And, {**Merle Despain**} who is now deceased, and I worked on allotment planning methods and manuals and handbooks, and put on training and began development of a new inventory system for the Bureau. And the first inventory system we came up with we called the Site Inventory Method or SIM. And, it was after development and extensive field testing by the staff here in the Service Center, it was implemented Bureauwide. It was meant to be a once for all inventory for the rangelands including soils, vegetation, wildlife habitat, and forestry, the whole business, was included in one inventory. There were two pilot tests run. One in Worland, Wyoming, and one in Las Cruces, New Mexico. And after this first year pilot test, it was decided that it was too time labor intensive and expensive, so we went back. Well, **Merle Despain** had transferred by then so I worked on it primarily myself and revised it and came up with the next version which we called the soil vegetation inventory method, which was similar to the soil, the SIM, the site inventory method, except that we instead of sampling each and every delineated type, we would stratify and then just take representative samples from each strata. That was, I think, really a good inventory method. It was the first time that the Bureau of Land Management had used

the old range site concept that we call the ecological site now days. And I think the inventory was valid and useful. However, in conjunction with this, we developed a computer system to analyze the data and summarize it and various outputs. And Fred Martinson developed a allocation model to be used to make the vegetation allocation to wildlife and watershed and livestock. And that's when politics got involved. The administration in office at that time didn't want anything that showed that there may be a need for a grazing reduction or showed that production was less than it should be. And, so, the soil vegetation inventory method was squashed. It's interesting those of us that had worked on development of the inventory method and the computer program to analyze it and the allocation model received a unit citation signed by James Watt. Two weeks later, we got the memo hand carried to us saying that we was to no longer use the method. So, that was kind of an interesting. I think one of the most disappointing of my career cause I still think the soil vegetation inventory method was valid and we'd be a lot further ahead today if we at least made the inventory so we'd have baseline data from which to monitor and a one-time picture of where we are on the rangelands. In 1979, the old Standards and Technology Division at the Service Center was abolished. And that included the staff. I was on range as well as wildlife, the minerals staff, the planning staff, the recreation staff, the lands staff, economics staff and the old EMRIA Program. They were all abolished and positions abolished. Many of the people were transferred out or retired. They did form a new division called the Division of Resource Inventory Systems and I was fortunate enough to be placed on that staff. And continued there on that staff for about 6 months and then the Division Chief, Bill Pulford transferred to Washington. And I applied and much to my surprise was selected as the Division Chief in August of 1980. And, I've been Division Chief of that Division since 1980 even though we've been jerked around a little bit in that after about a year the name was changed to the Division of Resource Systems. And we were combined with the special studies staff which was essentially the old EMRIA Program as well as the resource systems staff which was made up of resource specialists working on various automated resource systems. We had another reorganization a couple of years later and we became just the Division of Resources. And at that time, we grew a little more in that we took on the remote sensing staff at that time also. And then following true to form, a couple of years later, we reorganized again and the Division was changed from a Division to a Branch and put in the Division of

Data Management. And that didn't last too long. Due to a GME and a roles and structures study, we were reorganized again and reconstituted as a Division of Resource Services. It kind of reminds me of something, an old time BLMer, in fact the fellow that hired me on in the Bureau of Land Management, Scoot Marsh used to say that the Bureau of Land Management is just like an old potato sack laying out in the yard. And that every new dog that passed through the yard grabs it and shakes it and it gives it new shape and pees on it but it still remains the same old organization. And that's kind of the way we've been in the Division of Resources. And that's a nutshell as my career experience.

JIM: Okay, well, let's go back over some aspects of this. You first came into the Bureau of Land Management in 1959 which was towards the end of the time that Director Woosley was Director of Bureau of Land Management. And then not too long after that, of course the Kennedy Administration will come in and will have Carl Landstrom coming in. Do you recall working as a range conservationist a change in management attitude in the range program as a consequence of that shifting from one administration to another?

JOHN: Oh, yeah. That was a big change in several areas. One is just about all of the employees when I started were either range conservationists or foresters if we had forestry or engineers. And that was about it. With the change in policies and procedures and we started getting into environmental concerns and development of environmental analyses and we started getting all kinds of new types of positions. We got recreation specialists, wildlife specialists, and we even got some strange critters, it seemed to us at that time such as sociologists and archaeologists and there was quite a difference. And it was a lot of difference, big difference in the way we did business. Before on range improvements, we'd go out and stake out a fence line or stake out a reservoir and build them. Now, we had to go through all kinds of analyses and planning before we could even start thinking about building any range improvements. So, there was a big change. It just kind of grew in momentum. And, not, you know, I'm not saying it was all bad, but it sure slowed down the wheels of progress as far as we were concerned in the range program.

JIM: Now, this was before NEPA, right?

JOHN: Yeah, we started analysis before NEPA and then once NEPA was passed, then we were locked into it, really locked in.

JIM: Okay. How about your dealings with the ranchers? Did that change any?

JOHN: Well, yeah, a little bit in that I think we kind of lost touch. We would work with the ranchers and go out and whittle and spit and visit and help them feed and all kinds of things and work together. And then we started getting these new people that didn't relate to the ranchers particularly. We had a lot more work to do and seemed we didn't have time to stop and visit. And I think the Bureau suffered from that. And I think that's the reason that later on in the range improvement act was passed that it called for consultation and coordination to get us back on track visiting about things before we did it.

JIM: Okay. Well, one thing that you brought up and that was about when you were sort of in transition from Rock Springs to Kanab, the introduction of the Resource Area Office. What kind of change do you think that had on the way that you were managing the public lands out there in the Bureau?

JOHN: I think it was a positive step. We kind of had the districts split up prior to that, most districts did with range ponds responsible for certain areas of the district. And this more or less formalized it and the idea was to put people closer to the ground and being more knowledgeable of the area. And that worked. We would only have two or three people in each Resource Area staff and they spent their time out on the ground. In fact, the Area Manager was normally the most knowledgeable person of the Resource Area and what was going on within that Resource Area. As the Resource Area staffs grew and they're quite sizable now, a lot of them, the Area Manager becomes more of an administrator and supervisor and doesn't get out on the ground as much as we originally did. But the concept was good and still is and dividing up the district into smaller, more

manageable areas. Like when I moved to Glenwood Springs, we, even though Glenwood was a relatively small district acreage-wise. It covered a large area of the state but BLM acreage-wise was fairly small and some of the Resource Areas were as small as 300,000 acres. And we had five Resource Areas and usually the Area Manager and one or two on his staff and they really knew that Resource Area and what was going on there and it was good. But with the later reorganizations and abolishment of Districts and so forth, the Resource Areas grew in size as well as staff.

JIM: While you were in Kanab and then later on Glenwood Springs, something happened that must have impacted upon you somewhat and that was the Classification of Multiple Use Act?

JOHN: Yeah. Let me address that. Let me backtrack a little. One of my proudest accomplishments in Kanab was that in was in the period when we were making range inventories and going through an adjudication, readjudication of the grazing rights, and we issued in Kanab while I was there, we issued 350 decisions. And there was some pretty substantial reductions in grazing, active grazing privileges in a lot of them. And, so, I personally met with each and every operator and went over what our findings were and we came up with some tentative management plans and range improvement plans and I got through all 350 of them and got adjudication agreements signed on all of but three which were appealed. I thought that was a pretty good stroke of business. And there was adjustments as high as 80 percent in some of those permits. I know one old rancher told me when he came in. I was just dreading talking to him cause he was one of them that had about an 80 percent cut coming. And we sat down, and I went over the figures. He said, well I knew something was wrong cause my cows started coming home about a month after I turned them out. So, they were cognizant that they were overstocked.

JIM: Did you think most people in your position in the Bureau at that time made the effort to try and meet with every rancher when they were doing these?

JOHN: Yeah, that was, I think, the general rule, yeah. I think that was the way, generally Bureauwide, we tried to handle the business, but it wasn't as successful in our area.

JIM: That's just telling me that I'm getting close to the end of the tape.

JOHN: Oh.

JIM: These are, I guess, 15-minute tapes.

JOHN: I see. Anyway, back to your other question on classification multiple use act, that was another thing. We spent a lot of time and effort and public meetings and trying to delineate those lands that should be retained, managed for multiple use, those acreages that were suitable for sale or transfer or exchange. We met with County Commissioners, County Planning Commissions if they had them and all the various aspects of the public. We'd have public meetings, and it was a big effort. And we got a lot of local support out of that effort. I remember we went to a meeting in Walden to talk about North Park and we had worked extensively with the County Commissioners and got their concurrence and so we showed up at this public meeting and the house was packed. And we thought, oh boy, we're in for it now. So, we made our presentation and asked if there were any comments and there was none, and the meeting was adjourned. So, I asked the Chairman of County Commissioners, well, why did everybody show up here. And they said, well, we just wanted to show that we supported what you was doing. So that was a good effort. And I think it caused us to look at our lands and whether they were more valuable for retention and government ownership and multiple use management or if they did have some lands that should be disposed of either through sale or exchange or some other manner.

JIM: As long as we're on this Classification and Multiple Use Act and you sort of brought up this, brought up the word multiple use. Do you feel that the concept of multiple use has changed in the Bureau since the time that you arrived til now,

or do you think it's pretty much stayed the same?

JOHN: Well, an old District Manager I worked for in Rock Springs defined multiple use as cows in the summer, sheep in the winter, and antelope year-round. That was multiple use to him. And I think there has been change and part of the problem was various interpretations of what multiple use is. And, you know, you might take it to mean, well the lands should be available for all uses, whether it be recreation, wildlife, livestock or whatever. But really that's not very feasible. I think multiple use considerations should be taken but some lands are more suitable for recreation and that should be the emphasis. And then other uses permitted or allowed as long as they don't impair the primary use. And I think that's kind of the way we're evolving and that were designating wilderness study areas. We designate critical wildlife habitat. We're taking a strong look riparian areas. I think that's kind of the way we're applying multiple use. What is the best and most beneficial use of that land and then the other multiple uses are subservient to that, as long as they don't impair on that primary use.

JIM: Okay. Oh, let's see what else is going on at this time that you're in these various offices. Well, when you're in Glenwood, the National Environmental Policy Act is passed. Did it have an immediate impact on operations in Glenwood or did it take a while.

JOHN: I'd say, like I mentioned earlier, we had gotten into the mode of more planning and analysis prior to approving permits or taking action on the public lands. And then with the passage of NEPA, things kind of ground to a halt, you might say. And we discovered, hey, we're going to have to do a lot of the analysis before we do anything. And we may have overreacted in a way in that we really started going into deep detail and environmental assessment of every action. And we've kind of evolved from that now in that we can make a cursory examination and termination of no significant impact and get on with business. But it took us a while to get to that point, so we was analyzing everything to the same detail almost. And, so it changed over time. It changed the way the Bureau does business, for sure. And it kept getting more, the Classification Multiple

Use Act and planning system came, various planning systems came in, and then NEPA. So, we got more and more involved with public involvement whereas before we talked to the ranchers and the game and fish and that was about the only consultation that went on. Was getting Joe Public off the street, giving them a chance to comment and express their views was kind of new to us. And so the Bureau went through a time of trying to train Bureau employees how to handle this public involvement. There were various methodologies proposed for public involvement. We had lots of training sessions set up. We set up an agreement with the University of Wisconsin where we put a lot of people through a couple of programs. One was a longer period where the participants got a master's degree in land use planning and then there was a shorter one. I attended one of them for 2 weeks at the University of Wisconsin on land use planning. And that got on, not only in the land use planning, but also environmental assessment and how to involve the public and use their impact and provide feedback so it was a new ballgame for us to learn.

JIM: Stumped for a question here. I wanted to do some more on NEPA. I'm trying to think of an appropriate.

JOHN: I think, while you're thinking, more of the failings we had, and I'm not sure we're not still having that failing, is that we make environmental, develop environmental assessments, recommend mitigating measures, and preferred recommendations, make decisions and then we do very, very little follow-up to see and monitor where they impact really what we thought they was going to be. Were the mitigating measures effective? And we really followed down on follow-up and monitoring to see how effective our analysis and recommended measures were.

JIM: What do you think the impact of NEPA was in terms of the structure, the makeup, of the agency? Did you see a more accelerated change to some of these other programs areas or some of these more recreational people?

JOHN: Yeah, like I mentioned, we started getting all kinds of, different kinds of skills and they had a say in even how grazing permits and grazing plans were developed and

administered whereas it was strictly the range con before. And that was another learning exercise for all of us, how to deal with these other specialists and take their considerations. And a lot of frustrations and I think the old planning system we had, the unit resource analysis management framework procedure, aided that in that the resource specialist was to take the blinders on approach and develop his analysis and recommendations based on his resource only. And then the manager had to sift through all these conflicting recommendations and make a decision. Well and naturally it wasn't going to be what the resource specialist might have recommended, so he was frustrated. Why did I go all this work and accept what I did anyway? And so I was involved in that in developing a overall management plan and strategy rather than the blinders on approach. But, yeah, we had a lot of different kinds of specialists, and they added a lot. We all learned a lot about the resource out there other than just the soil and the grass.

JIM: Well, as long as we've gotten to planning, you said when you came to what was then the Denver Service Center, one of your first assignments was. Well, one of your first assignments was the Artic Gas but the other thing was on training. You had to sort of introduce the new, what was it, Management and Framework Plan?

JOHN: Yeah, it was the new manual out and some revised procedures, both on unit resource analysis and management framework plan which included some new areas which was the social economic part of the analysis. And we had the planners on the field had to develop social economic analysis and plans which was something new to us. That's when we got involved with sociologists and economists and those kinds of things. So we went out and put on a training. It would be a week-long session, usually two of us, either Bill Pulford and I or I can't think of the other fellow's name now. Anyway, we'd go out and put on a week-long training session, go through the manuals. We have a mocked up URAMFP exercise that they'd spend a couple days on. So, it was a pretty intense training session, and it was kind of fun except I got tired of traveling and all that. But we saw lots of country and lots of districts and lots of people and tried to get the word out on how the procedures worked.

Dick Barber was the other guy that I worked with.

JIM: Now, you've already alluded to what you felt were some of the shortcomings of that planning system. Anything else, both good or bad?

JOHN: Well, I think, you know, the main thing was the blinders on approach in that it alienated various resource specialists from one another because they were made to be advocates for their resource. And then it made the decision process very difficult for the manager to get all these conflicting recommendations that he had to sort through through various overlays and stuff and writeups and make a decision. And consequently, the resource specialist that did the best job of analysis and had the flashiest displays a lot of times got the advantage over what those that didn't take into account either. The manager, a lot of his decisions are based on politics and social economic impacts also. And they can't be strictly just resource oriented. But, I think that was the main downfall. Otherwise, it was a pretty good, pretty systematic, thorough analysis to develop a resource management plan. The procedures were good. The follow through may not have been that good in that we got some general recommendations, general objectives that weren't quantifiable or measurable. And so there's no way of telling whether they meet the objectives or not. We're still wrestling with that but it's getting better.

JIM: When you were a Range Scientist, you've already, I think, pretty much discussed the two inventory methods that you were involved with developing, I suppose, just on any. Did you have anything else you wanted to add to that?

JOHN: No, I don't think so. That was a fun time. I enjoyed the work and I thought we come up with something good. And it's not a total loss. Our present inventory, rangeland inventory management called the site inventory management or the ecological site inventory method is kind of a take off of the old SIMs it's quite similar. I think we're on the right track.

JIM: Okay. Service Center. When you were in charge of resources going through its various stages of development and disestablishment and whatever, what did you feel the primary role for that Division during that period of time that you were in charge?

JOHN: The same as I see it right now and that is in technical development, providing technical assistance and technology transfer to the field and just being here to help the field do a better job. And then, I think we've done a pretty good job and I give the credit to the staff I've had through the years, various people. In spite of the turmoil and the various reorganizations, they've stuck to it, and they've stuck to the job and I think we've provided a valuable service over the years. My philosophy as then: number one priority is providing assistance to the field, and I think we pretty well as best we could provided that assistance.

JIM: Why and you tell me if I'm wrong with this perception that I have, but why has there, while we're providing this service to the field, why have we received the. Why have some of the State Offices been reluctant to take advantage of the service and why have many of the State Offices try to always make a run at the Service Center to get rid of these capabilities that are here?

JOHN: Well, I don't know. That's a good question. One thing that I discovered that, and I think when we had the employee excellence seminars, I stressed this too. When any facet of the Service Center fails, whether it's untimely processing of a travel voucher or whatever the case may be, the field doesn't say, well, that's finance. They say that's the Service Center. And so, the whole Service Center gets a black eye from an individual in the Service Center. And then we've always seemed to have a good rapport from technician to technician in the field. But from management to management is where we got the criticisms and like you said the runs on us for depleting the staff or whatever. And the reason for that, I'm not sure. I don't know.

JIM: Okay. Well, I think I am just about done with questions. I guess I'll just have basically, and you don't have to answer these questions. But you've been in the Bureau of Land Management quite a while, over 30 years. I guess the question would be this, in your opinion what is the best thing about the Bureau and what is the worst about the Bureau?

JOHN: Well, I guess the best is the people. I really think the Bureau of Land Management has some top-notch people. They're hard working, they want to do what's right, and they really produce some quality work even though they may not get credit for it always and the results may not be apparent. I think the people, we have good people, and it has been primarily over the years a people organization. The Bureau takes care of their people and we've never had a RIF and there is concern about the employees and they do do a good job and are dedicated, know what's right, want to do what's right which leads to the bad part is that we're so subject to political interference and doing what's right for the resources and the nation as a whole. We still live in the days where if an Area Manager or District Manager comes down hard and tries to do what's right, he can get congressional interference and moved promptly. That can still happen; it still does today. And I think that's a sad commentary because the people that try to do a good job oftentimes you're not going to please everybody. And if you don't please everyone, well, then you're subject to reprisal. But it's a good outfit. I've really enjoyed working for the BLM. I've been proud of the BLM and what it's tried to do in a lot of areas. I think we're really going through a time of frustration right now with the heavy emphasis on ADP and modernization. That's caused a lot of morale problems and hopefully, it'll be ironed out. And that they won't lose sight of our number one of managing the public lands and its resources. And ADP is just a tool to help us do that and not the driving force. It'll weather, BLM will weather the storm because of the good people that we have.

JIM: Okay, anything else you want to bring up that you don't think we've covered? Questions I should have asked?

JOHN: No, I think we've pretty well covered the area. It's

a good outfit and we need to just hang in there and weather the storm.

JIM: Okay, well, thank you for your time.